Virtual General Synod Able to Connect Delegates with Each Other and the Church

by Tim Kershner
UCC News, July 20

Instead of descending on Kansas City for their biennial General Synod, members of the United Church of Christ gathered virtually instead. Coming together from their homes, or perhaps in small groups from their local church, delegates conducted the business of the church remotely.

The Rev. Ben Chavis, a longtime leader of the UCC’s racial- and environmental-justice work, preaches during opening worship, Sunday, July 11.

The UCC’s 33rd General Synod closed with worship Sunday, July 18, eight days after the historic “Special Edition” event opened. The Rev. Benjamin F. Chavis preached about the intersection of faith, justice and love during opening worship July 11.

To continue reading more about Synod, go to https://www.ucc.org/virtual-general-synod-able-to-connect-delegates-with-each-other-and-the-church and there is more information to be found in this issue on page 33.

A typical delegate’s workspace

Reflections on the Synod Experience

Synod 33 was to be held in Kansas City. Instead it was held in thousands of living rooms, home offices and on couches, beds and backyard decks. COVID-19 meant that — since the close of Synod 32 in 2019 — planners had to shift gears. So much of the thousands of hours and months of detailed logistical planning for all the plenary sessions, worship services, workshops and breakout rooms and group meals had to be reimagined as a virtual Synod. Plan B was engineered and launched — on the wings of WiFi connections and lots of prayers — and the church’s business was done from locations dispersed across the country.

A virtual Synod came with some silver linings. Our delegates did not have to deal with airline terminal hassles and long TSA lines, no living out of a suitcase, no worrying about what-to-wear. But missing were the invaluable personal one-on-one connections with UCC brothers and sisters from across the denomination – alas, no late night theological confabs in the hotel lounge.

We thank our Florida delegates for their service on our behalf. Some of them have shared about their unique Synod experience, and here’s what we’ve heard.

REV. MIKE FORD
CONGREGATIONAL UCC/PUNTA GORDA

I have an assignment: in 200 words or less, describe my reflections on General Synod 33! This was my third Synod as a delegate, but it was, by far, the most interesting for me. The virtual format allowed me to visit more workshops and optional events than I could have in person. I have to admit, the virtual format was also more challenging. Since we were at home, our regular lives were lived, and ministry was done — the 16 hour days are a challenge.

I expect worship at Synod to be extraordinary and unique, but this was over the top. We were teased into a combination of traditions blurred together effortlessly and all of it inspiring. Our preachers were the kind that have you on the edge of your seat or shouting AMEN! all of the time.

The keynote speakers were exceptional. Valerie Kaur proclaimed that the darkness we are experiencing can represent two things, either the...continued on page 2
tomb or the womb, that a new world is ready to be born from love, radical love. Adam Russell Taylor, inspired us with, and I quote from the UCC News, “urged ‘beloved community’ as an antidote to the twin viruses of ‘systemic racism and toxic polarization.”

The business, well — let’s say it was not without controversy. For the first time I saw a defeated resolution brought back to the Door by the people who voted against it.

Suffice it to say that my Synod experience was inspiring. I can’t wait to pour over the recordings of speakers and worship opportunities for further insights on how to become that Beloved Community birthed in uncertain times. Thanks for sending me!

Rev. Dr. Sheila Guillaume
Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach

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Missin: Typical Florida Conference table décor (Synod in Grand Rapids, 2011)

It was a unique Synod but there were no 6am delegations gathering. No pink flamingos on the Florida table because there was no table (texting isn’t the same). There were no hugs with delegates from other conferences who I’ve known for years; no laughter at the Moderator’s jokes or applause honoring award recipients. There were no groans when someone offered yet another amendment; no late-night gab sessions reflecting on each day’s events. All were missing.

Just as in local congregations, virtual events have nourished and sustained us, but it’s the spirited camaraderie that makes us church. There’s nothing like the “tie that binds,” rooted in ordinary expressions of community, to bring us alive. I’m grateful to have served as your GS33 delegate.

Rev. Brad S. Lutz
Miami Shores Community Church

This was the fifth General Synod I’ve attended and the most unusual. As I reflect, I made a checklist: creative worship – check! Super keynote speakers – check! Committee meetings and resolutions – check. Elections, budgets, reports, parliamentary procedures and debates – check. Exhibit hall – check. All business was completed thanks to amazing and efficient technology – but something was missing.

“W”

We are one family,” was the theme song of the GS33 worship services, and it was a wonderful way to remind us that we are all “Rooted in Love.” As it spoke to the reality of our being in separate spaces, and yet united together in God.

Other aspects of GS33 worth noting include the resolutions, educational intensives, workshops and optional events that were brought before the Body to both challenge and affirm our commitment to offer love, peace and justice towards all people, everywhere.

Moreover, John [Vertigan] offered virtual opportunities for the delegates to check-in, and it was a joy to join together in conversation about the uniquely awesome GS33 virtual experience. In short, I am grateful to have served as your GS33 delegate.

Andy Edds
Hope UCC/Rockledge

The 33rd Synod of the UCC was an amazing virtual accomplishment, which I enjoyed very much. The hours of planning that went into this new format resulted in a unique and enriching experience. The delegate voting was easy to accomplish after the training, and the results were available in a timely manner. The moderator, Penny Lowe, was not easily rattled and always pleasant. The variety of musical and worship experiences was fantastic. I particularly enjoyed the “Native Prayers through a Pandemic” at the beginning of the closing worship, and the original hymns.

I was on the committee for resolution #5, “Gender Safety and Equity.” With some rewording of descriptors, it was passed — an informative and amazing disturbing report of very unfortunate experiences for some in our UCC churches. We hope this resolution can help to make a difference.

Ready for Synod 34 in Indianapolis in 2023!

Rev. Dr. Hargrove

Another learning is that we have a big staff compared to many other conferences. We’ve lived in a kind of privilege in that regard. It would be great to be able to continue in that kind of privilege, but declining giving to OCWM over the last decade or more means we have to staff in ways that keep the Conference sustainable for the ministry we’d like to do together for years to come. (Did you know that 1.5 of our 91 congregations in Florida provide about 80% of our Conference funding?) As we depend entirely on voluntary giving for our Conference ministry plan, we must seek to be good stewards of what comes our way so that all may be served.

Further, we’ve learned that many conferences have stepped away from generalists who act as deployed regional staff such as we have for many years here in Florida. The emerging model now is to celebrate one staff team wherein each member has a portfolio in keeping with a particular skill set and responds to particular needs across the life of the whole organization.

So much for some of our learnings. From these facts, we have honed in on a model for our immediate future with an eye to the longer term. First, as will be posted soon in the UCC employment opportunities:

“The Florida Conference will seek an ordained UCC minister for a full-time Associate Conference Minister (ACM) position to begin on or before November 1, 2021. The ACM will staff the Conference’s Committee on Ministry (COM) and each of its three regional subcommittees. The ACM will have primary responsibility for processes related to fitness reviews, situational Support Consultations, boundary training, community of practice, and other COM needs. The ACM will also join the professional staff team caring for our 91 congregations and the active pastors across the Conference. The Associate Conference Minister will report to the Conference Minister, who reports to the Conference Board of Directors. The Florida Conference is an equal opportunity employer and welcomes everyone. Women, persons of color, LGBTQ+, and persons with disabilities are strongly encouraged to apply for this ministry position.”

Upon hire, this Associate Conference Minister will be joined by Associate Conference Minister Rev. Leslie Etheredge, who will continue on the staff team assisting new hires in their transition to the Florida Conference while undertaking staff support for all of the transition and search and call needs of the churches in Florida. She will continue to have responsibilities for care of congregations along with the other team members. At a time of mutual agreement, Leslie will reduce her commitment to something less than full time.

Neal Watkins will continue in a re-titled role as Minister for Congregational Life and Faith Formation. He will have staffing oversight of several conference-wide ministry teams, as well as offering church retreats focusing on leadership, vision-casting, youth ministry, volunteer recruitment and renewal, rethinking worship in a new day and other such programmatic elements of our common life. He, like every team member, will have responsibilities for care of congregations.

(1) John will continue as Conference Minister and head of staff and will adjust my portfolio to include a more structurally intentional focus on relationships across the Conference such that the whole staff team will share more visibly in responsibility for the health of our covenant in the Florida Conference.

There will be no adjustment to our support staff model at this time. Dave and Dana and Beth are providing us with great service and you should be grateful.

I can say with confidence that the staff most impacted by this change away from regionalization have expressed enthusiasm for this model and had important input into the formation of this path forward. We are excited about our potential as a staff team and even more excited for what we believe will be a faithful level of service to each of our constituent congregations and pastors. While each church will no longer have “our Regional Minister,” they will now have “our Conference staff team,” who will reach out to maintain that visible and faithful vitality that is the hallmark of our common life in the Florida Conference.

Be at peace, and be in touch, won’t you.

From e-Celebrate, June 23
As humans, we often think of planting seeds in reference to growing food or preparing a beautiful landscape. In our church lives, we also understand that planting seeds also is referenced in the Bible in many verses to help us understand how to prepare a harvest for growth and prepare for righteousness.

The United Church of Christ has prepared me in my Christian walk to prepare a harvest, and I have witnessed this harvest in many of the persons I have come to know in our wider church. As I have taken this walk, I have found many in our church who are laser-focused on the mission of the UCC: To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

I have found many in our church who are our wider church. As I have taken this walk, I have witnessed this harvest in growth and prepare for righteousness. In our church lives, we also experienced in the Bible in many verses to help understand that planting seeds also is referred to growing seeds in reference to growing many communities.

Here in Florida, there is still much work to be done as we focus on our mission. The earth beneath us is porous and we just keep building, no matter what. The long-term availability of water is a major issue, yet we all but ignore it. Within the state, we have many communities that are divided among racial, gender and certainly political lines. Our churches are changing, but is this a good thing?

So, what seeds are you sowing and what do you want to harvest? I think this is a good question for all who love Jesus Christ.

Make Plans for the Annual Gathering

The Conference office will soon roll out an early registration option for an IN-PERSON Annual Gathering to be held October 14-16 at the Community Church of Vero Beach. An official letter of call to the annual meeting is pending along with information about accommodation options. Registration will feature a banquet-optimal price to help keep down costs.

A highlight of this year’s meeting will be the banquet where we’ll celebrate the ministry and retirement of the Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove. Please plan to join us for a very special event! You’ll also have the opportunity to engage in several workshop opportunities and the plenary presentation by the Rev. Dr. Carolyne Call from the Penn Central Conference of the United Church of Christ. Save the dates now and plan to join us for this reunion of partners from across the life of the Florida Conference.

Consider Donating to the Conference

There are several ways to give, and your generosity will be greatly appreciated. Please click below to go to our website and make your selection:

- Donate as a Friend to support the current operating expenses of the Florida Conference
- Make an enduring gift to the Church Redevelopment Fund to revitalize and renew programs and innovative projects in our local churches
- Make a Legacy Gift of cash, securities, or property to provide perpetual support of a Florida Conference Mission you embrace

… I wish to discuss this gift in more detail with Florida Conference Minister Rev. John Vertigan

Make a Legacy Gift of cash, securities, or property to provide perpetual support of a Florida Conference Mission you embrace…

Last Florida Conference Boundary Training Opportunity in 2021

The Florida Conference will sponsor a Healthy Ministry Relationships Training (formerly “Boundary Training”) entitled “A Position of Trust: Committing to Healthy Ministry Relationships” on Friday, October 29, and Saturday, October 30, from 1-5:30pm each day via Zoom video conference. Rev. Dr. Tracy Dawson and Rev. Wendy Kidd of the Rocky Mountain Conference Healthy Ministry Relationships Wider Ministry will lead the interactive workshop for authorized ministers (active and retired), lay leaders, seminarians and members in discernment.

Originally scheduled in June and postponed because too few people registered, this is the last Boundary Training opportunity the Florida Conference will offer in 2021. There is no cost to participate, but registration is required. Read more and register now!
Did You Miss This News?

The Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove has announced his retirement from active ministry to be effective July 31. While we lament the loss of his presence and personality in our common witness, we also celebrate this new chapter in his life as he and his wife, Cora, make plans for a retirement surrounded by family and friends in North Carolina.

Please join us in wishing all the best to this servant of God who has ministered so well with us these last two decades. Contributions toward a gift of recognition and thanksgiving may be sent to the Conference office with “Hargrove” in the memo line of your check. Cards and notes may also be forwarded and will be shared with Raymond at the annual Gathering banquet in October that will be held in his honor.

A Congregation Leaves and One Returns

The Board has agreed to dissolve the covenant between the Florida Conference and the Union Congregational Church of Avon Park. Many attempts have been made in recent years to engage that congregation as a ministry of the United Church of Christ, to no avail. Clearly they chose an independent path many years ago. In recognition of their journeying, the Union Congregational Church in Avon Park is no longer a congregation of the United Church of Christ. Please pray for the continued success of their ministry to their local community.

Second, the Board has received and agreed to a request for membership in the Florida Conference from Jupiter First Church. You may remember that Jupiter First Church left the UCC some years ago under a rather unique set of circumstances. Their desire to rejoin the United Church of Christ had been worshipping.

It said it had a closing service July 18 at the location where it formed the Florida Conference that it had closed. The church engaged that congregation as a ministry of the United Church of Christ/Taverns, with service concludes October 3.

Who Do We Say We Are?

We are churches of the United Church of Christ. We are members of a whole, yet each of our congregations is different—with different histories, identities and missions. We proclaim in our UCC motto, “That they may all be one” (a tweak of John 17:21), but there is autonomy in our unity, a legacy of our congregational beginnings.

What words pop out when “church shoppers” go to one of our congregation’s websites? What few words of texts are featured prominently in the e-blasts and other communications sent out to our churches to their members and friends? Who do we say we are? In this edition and in future issues, you’ll find several images like this one telling you who these congregations say that they are.

In our diversity, may we all be one.

New “Rooted in Love” Stewardship Theme Materials Available

New stewardship materials available from UCC Resources help congregations tell their story while making a request for financial support.

The materials include everything needed to run an effective campaign, such as bulletin inserts, pledge cards and graphics. A practical campaign guide provides support for leaders running their first campaign and offers suggestions for those looking to customize stewardship messages to their own setting. Options for purchase include both printed and downloadable formats; prices start at $39.95. You can find the new stewardship materials here.

From e-Celebrate, June 9

Lighthouse Congregational UCC in Naples Closes

On July 18, Lighthouse Congregational UCC Naples informed the Florida Conference that it had closed. The church said that it had a closing service July 18 at the location where it had been worshipping.

From e-Celebrate, July 21

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From e-Celebrate, July 21

August 1

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, United Church of Marco Island

August 8

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, United Church of Marco Island

August 11

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, United Church of Marco Island

August 15

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Faith UCC/Dundee

August 22

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Christ’s Promise UCC/Auburndale

September 6-14

CM Rev. John Vertigan, study leave at Lancaster Theological Seminary

September 26

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Faith UCC/Bradenton

September 29

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Windermere Union Church

October 10

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Faith UCC/Bradenton

October 17

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Union Congregational UCC/Holly Hill

October 24

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Miami Shores Community UCC

October 3

ACM Rev. Leslie Etheredge, Union Congregational Church/Taverns

October 10

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Miami Beach Community UCC

October 17

CM Rev. John Vertigan, North Port UCC and Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte

October 21

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Mount Dora Community UCC

October 24

CM Rev. John Vertigan, St. John’s Episcopal Church in Vero Beach

October 31

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church in Bradenton

November 1

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Grace UCC/Indian Harbour Beach

November 8

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Community UCC/Indian Harbour Beach

November 15

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Grace UCC/Indian Harbour Beach

November 22

CM Rev. John Vertigan, Community UCC/Indian Harbour Beach
Finding Refuge in Polk County

The Lakeland Ledger recently ran a lengthy article by Gary White on June 27 titled “Some Polk County Churches Provide Refuge for LGBTQ Faithful: A few local congregations promote ‘affirming’ approaches.” The article looked at three churches in the county that are not merely “welcoming” but are affirming to members of the LGBTQ community, one of which is Christ’s Promise UCC in Auburndale (one is non-denominational and the other Unitarian Universalist).

Pastor Mel Wilkinson is quoted at length about her faith journey having been raised in a church-going Lakeland family, a closeted lesbian who came out about 20 years ago after her marriage ended and she left the “church” — “thinking God hated me” — and then finding God at a gay-friendly church in Tampa that changed her life. She was ordained in a dependent church and is going through the ordination process in the UCC, and she accepted Christ’s Promise invitation to be its Pastor in 2019. Christ’s Promise was a Metropolitan Community Church (named Rainbow Promise) until 2007 when it joined the UCC.

The church used to have a rainbow logo on its sign, but that has been replaced with the “God is Still Speaking” motto of the UCC along with the words “Open & Inclusive.” Rev. Mel remembers when Christ’s Promise was the only “gay” church in the county, and that’s the way the church was seen by the community. She is quoted saying, “We got to where we said, ‘You know what, we don’t want to be just ‘the gay church.’ Why can’t we just be a church for all people?’” She estimates about 4/5 of the members are LGBTQ.

The church attracted people like Cookie McQuag, a lesbian who had begun regularly attending a Baptist church. But when she went up to answer the altar call to become a member, she was confronted publicly by the pastor with “I have one question for you. Are you a lesbian?” Needless to say, she left that church, and when she first attended Christ’s Promise “felt welcomed the minute I walked through the door. It’s just the weird way that God led me to a church where I felt like I belonged.”

Pastor Mel tells of hearing so many stories of young people in the county who have become alienated from their parents and faith communities once they have accepted the fact they are not straight. “Or they said, ‘Can you really be a Christian and gay?’ I am so surprised young people still have to ask that question.”

Rev. Mel believes she is seeing a growing convergence between LGBT-oriented churches and mainline churches taking place. “I’m telling you, maybe not in my lifetime, but I’m seeing a change, a shift in what happens in our mainstream churches and what they see in us,” she said. “I think there’s a shift happening. It’s very, very slow, but it’s happening and I’m seeing it … that bridge is building, and I’m glad I got to where we said, ‘You know what, we don’t want to be just ‘the gay church.’ Why can’t we just be a church for all people?’”

Reaching Out to Children in Need in the Community

The coronavirus pandemic highlighted the fact that many in Miami’s Haitian community lacked a level of digital proficiency needed to access essential resources. Consequently, Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center, with the support of the Miami Foundation along with other grants, including from Coral Gables Congregational UCC Board of Justice and Witness, developed a special phone-based tech program tailored to the needs and capacities of their clients. The students learned how to use their smart phones to full capacity, including how to access and utilize apps, scheduler, texting, and countless other services.

On Tuesday, June 29, the first class graduated in a ceremony that brought members of the community, elected leaders and Pastors Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner and Rev. Aaron Lauer together to celebrate this achievement. Church member Leonie Hermantin (pictured with Rev. Laurie) was instrumental in helping this program receive the financial support and encouragement needed to make it possible.

Recently the Board of Justice and Witness and the church’s German Ministry received a grant application from the Lucy Project, a Miami-based organization that advocates for children struggling to read and provides access to literacy education, especially for kids with dyslexia. CGCUCU provided the Lucy Project with a grant of $2,500 funded by a generous donation from the German Ministry.

This summer the Lucy Project is subsidizing reading remediation for 10 students, three of whom are in Coral Gables. They are also using the summer to build up their in-house Professional Development program, train 10 teachers in Overtown, and look for office space.

Come fall they are hoping to reach at least another 60 students with literacy education.

Update on the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance

By Rev. Alan Cox Pastor, Rawlflower UCC/Naples

The Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance (IFHA) hopes to begin the infrastructure work later this year on the 10-acre property on Trafford Road in Immokalee.

IFHA is also in the beginning phase of a capital campaign. One source of funds may be the United Church of Christ Disaster Ministry. The reason the UCC got involved in the first place with IFHA was it was seen as a good use of funds that were donated to the UCC Disaster Ministry after Hurricane Irma. Due to staffing changes and the pandemic, those funds have not been spent. The funds could not be used for the purchase of land but can for construction purposes. Our Florida Conference, with its donation of $200,000 of unrestricted funds, allowed IFHA to purchase the land. The Florida Conference was not the only source of funds but was a significant contributor to allow IFHA to purchase the land.

Recently IFHA board members had a virtual meeting with UCC Wider Church Ministry personnel to talk with them about the availability of funds that remain from Hurricane Irma. The IFHA board asked for $250,000 and is awaiting the decision from the national setting. If those funds are awarded to IFHA, it will be able to start the infrastructure work. It will be a big step in the process, but it is not easy starting a new non-profit going through a pandemic and trying to raise significant funding for this project. The total cost of the project is around $18 million. IFHA plans to do the work in phases as funds become available.

Surfside

When most of the country awakened on Thursday, June 24, first responders already were frantically at work trying to locate survivors of the collapse of the Champlain Towers in Surfside. As governmental and private entities rushed to provide assistance, faith communities joined the effort doing what churches, temples and mosques do in these situations: pray, roll up their sleeves and ask, “How can we help?” We checked with our Florida UCC congregations in the greater metro area surrounding Surfside and this is what we learned.

Coral Gables Congregational UCC redid its worship service from what was originally planned for Sunday, June 27, the Sunday after the tragedy, to reflect their prayers, concerns and support for the people of that community. The service was changed to one of faith, hope and love using the power of music, prayer and the witness of Scripture to bring healing to the hearts of congregants and for the healing of so many who had suffered so much.

The church also established a Surfside Relief Fund, which was generously given to by members and friends of the church. An initial check was given to a friend of the congregation — a priest with whom they work through the community organization PACT (People Acting for Community Together) — who lost six families in his congregation. CGCUCU wanted to support his ability to provide funeral expenses, therapeutic support, shelter and other personal needs as he saw fit.

Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner shares “It is our goal, that long after the television cameras leave and the light doesn’t shine as brightly on those who have lost so much, to be of service and support through the sharing of resources — be it of time, talent or treasure — as folks face the future.”

The Emergency Response Fund at Plymouth Congregational Church/ Miami along with individual members gave almost $9,000 to a consortium led by the Coral Gables Foundation (working with Miami Heat, Miami Foundation and several other groups).
Holy Ground

BY MARGE MILLER
MEMBER, FAITH UCC/DUNEDIN

I t was after the devastating shooting some years ago at Marjory Stoneman Doug-

lass High School in Parkland, Florida, that Pastor Rev. Mike MacMillan suggested that our church mark paper origami Peace Cranes as a symbol of our sympathy and compassion.

A few church members got together and learned how to fold the cranes and it just took off from there. Before you knew it, there were hundreds and when Don Miller and Lizbeth Cone really got into it, there were 2,000 of them! Lizbeth lovingly and craftily strung them into bundles of 1,000 cranes each and as senseless shootings became increasingly a common occurrence, the Peace Cranes graced our Sanctuary, a visual reminder to pray daily for peace in our world.

As much as we loved having them, the time came for the Peace Cranes to take flight. Where should they go? Don had the idea to send them to the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, where 49 young souls lost their lives that dreadful night on June 12, 2016. It seemed especially appropriate since the 5-year marker of that day was approaching. However, we soon found out that the Pulse club had never reopened, and instead, an interim permanent Museum to open in 2022. Ms. Poma’s brother, John, had died of AIDS in 1991 and she opened the club in his memory. Don Miller and Lizbeth Cone really got into it, there were 2,000 of them! Lizbeth lovingly and craftily strung them into bundles of 1,000 cranes each and as senseless shootings became increasingly a common occurrence, the Peace Cranes graced our Sanctuary, a visual reminder to pray daily for peace in our world.

words of the hymn “Holy Ground” sang in my head. “Holy ground, God’s given us holy ground. God is in this place and so this ground is holy.” That’s how we felt when we were there. We were on Holy Ground.

For more information about the Pulse Memorial and Remembrance Week activities, check out their website: www.ONEPULSEFOUNDATION.org

From the Open Door e-newsletter of Faith UCC/Dunedin for the week of May 28

UCC Donors Fund Seventh Medical Debt Buy, Abolishing $1.3 Million in Three States

BY CONNIE LARIMAN
UCC NEWS, MAY 7

I n 2019, the Rev. Traci Blackmon pledged to buy up medi-
cal debt in the six geographic regions in which the United Church of Christ serves. The denomination has lived into that promise with the latest buy in Florida, Louisiana and Texas. The church sent $15,000, money from First Congregational UCC, Lake Worth and from a Giving Tuesday campaign, to wipe out more than $1.3 million in medical debt for 815 fami-

UCC Debt Buys So Far

To date, more than $67 million in medical debt has been abolished by UCC:

- The UCC’s medical debt project began with a 2019 buy in Chicago, in the Great Lakes Region. There, church donations abolished $5.3 million in debt for 5,688 families on the city’s South Side.
- In January 2020, the effort moved to St. Louis and the West Central Region, where $12.9 million in medical debt was elimi-
nated for 11,108 households in that city and St. Louis County.
- Last June, nine California congregations in the Western Re-
gion wiped out $7.4 million in medical debt for 3,539 house-
holds across the state.
- In October, a collaborative effort by 122 UCC congregations, four Associations, and more than 100 households in the South-
ern New England Conference abolished $26.2 million in medical debt in two separate buys. Recipients were families in seven states in and around the New England Region — plus first responders across the country, via RIP’s Helping COVID Heroes Fund.
- In November, gifts from 20 UCC congregations in the Kansas-
Oklahoma Conference, plus several individuals and church bodies, abolished $5.2 million in medical debt in those two states. More than 3,200 households in the West Central Region benefited from that buy.
- An eighth buy is in progress in the Southwest Conference. Number nine is coming from the Penn West Conference. Work-
ing with groups like the UCC, buying up debt for pennies on the dollar, RIP has been able to erase over $4.5 billion in medical debts, providing financial relief for over 2,654,401 individuals and families across the country.

As the UCC letter reads, “You may never enter the doors of one of our churches, but we are the United Church of Christ and we love you. No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. And most importantly, you are beloved by God and your debt has been forgiven.”
Music and the Arts

On every Thursday evening at 7:30pm from July 8-August 12 the Community Arts Program (CAP) VIRTUAL Summer Concert series was taking place at Coral Gables Congregational UCC. This is its 36th consecutive year and second that is virtual. The six concerts that are broadcast free feature outstanding jazz and classical musicians.

The UCC/Fort Lauderdale was recently awarded a $5,000 grant from the Our Fund Foundation’s Arts & Culture fund. The grant will help support the church’s Holiday Concert with a symphony component.

In July members of Naples UCC were able to renew the tradition sharing a film together followed by dinner at a restaurant. They viewed “Greenbook,” the Academy Award-winning movie about the relationship between two real-life people, one Black and one White, on a journey together through the Deep South in the ’60s. Recent cultural outings at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach included a group visit to the local movie theater for a viewing of “In the Heights” followed by conversation at a nearby pub.

Rev. Dr. John Danner (Sanibel Congregational UCC): www.periwinkleponderings.blogspot.com/
Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota): www.gracetraces.blogspot.com/
Rev. Shawn Garvey (First Congregational Church/Winter Park): www.fccwp.org/blog/
United Church of Gainesville: (www.ucgainesville.org/sample-page-2/)

Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach observed its July 4 worship with a patriotic musical celebration under the direction of organist/Choir Director Dale Williams. Featured were six local vocalists with renditions of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” favorites by George M. Cohan, “America, the Beautiful” and other stirring patriotic songs. The program concluded with a song written by church member Marsha Stevens-Pino titled “I Still Have a Dream,” a piece inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

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The United Church in Tallahassee had its first Church Work Day in more than a year over the June 12 weekend. About 14 members and friends of UCT stepped up and contributed hours of labor to make the church presentable and welcoming for re-opening.

In preparing Hope UCC/Rockledge for its July re-opening, UVC lamps were installed in all the AC units, killing 99% of all microorganisms floating in the air. Also, carpets were professionally cleaned.

Clergy in a growing number of our Florida congregations have created blogs, which are discussion or information sites on the web offering posts on various topics. Here are a few of them you may wish to check out. If you know of others, contact Celebrate Florida (celebrateflorida@uccfla.org) and we’ll include them in future issues.

Rev. John Danner (Sanibel Congregational UCC): www.sermonbundle.blogspot.com
Rev. Dr. Wes Bixby (First Congregational UCC/Sarasota): www.ucgainesville.org/sample-page-2/
Rev. Dr. John Danner (Sanibel Congregational UCC/Winter Park): www.fccwp.org/blog/
Rev. Mike MacMillan (Faith UCC/Dunedin): www.fccwp.org/blog/
New Sacred – A United Church of Christ blog www.newsunitedchurch.org
Rev. Dr. Anna Verlee Copeland (Community Church of Vero Beach) https://ccovb.org/rev-dr-anna-verlee-copelands-blog/
Rev. George Miller (Emmanuel UCC/Spring Hill) https://pas terfiles.blogspot.com

On every Thursday evening at 7:30pm from July 8-August 12 the Community Arts Program (CAP) VIRTUAL Summer Concert series was taking place at Coral Gables Congregational UCC. This is its 36th consecutive year and second that is virtual. The six concerts that are broadcast free feature outstanding jazz and classical musicians.

The UCC/Fort Lauderdale was recently awarded a $5,000 grant from the Our Fund Foundation’s Arts & Culture fund. The grant will help support the church’s Holiday Concert with a symphony component.

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Thank You! by Rev. Donna Cooney (United Church of Christ DoC-St. Augustine) SC2ER Facilitator

The White Privilege/Racial Justice Committee at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota sends e-blast “thoughts for the week” to church members. Here are some recent examples:

• Did you ever feel afraid for your life when a traffic officer pulled you over?
• Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
• White Privilege is the ability to pass laws to prevent everyone from learning history that makes white people feel uncomfortable


The June 9 “Conversations with Bob” Zoom discussion group at UCC/Fort Lauderdale addressed Critical Race Theory. One question they considered was “How should we, as people of our religious faith, respond?”

Year-in-Review: CHHSM Board Examines Work on Race, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with Eye on Future Actions by Barb Powell UCC News, June 14

The UCC’s Council for Health & Human Service Ministries (CHHSM) Board of Directors, meeting online June 7-9, focused a large portion of its meeting reviewing the commitments made by the Board, staff and members in the June 2020 statement on the pandemic of systemic racism. At the top of the list was the final report of the organization’s recently completed Race, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (RDEI) Assessment.

“Following the death of George Floyd, the CHHSM Board and its staff committed to the Race, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (RDEI) process. We began our efforts a year ago by suspending the CHHSM Board agenda and giving much-needed time and attention to the clarion call for Black lives to matter in America,” said Board member the Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey Guillaume, senior pastor of Union Congregational UCC/West Palm Beach. “At the time, my son was 10 years old, and I found myself in tears during the Board meeting over the possibility of systemic racism taking the life of my sun-kissed son, the way it took the life of George Floyd and so many others.”

To conduct the assessment, CHHSM engaged the Equias Group. The assessment report presented to the Board first identified assets and barriers to move forward with race, equity, diversity and inclusion work. Based on those assets and barriers, it then enumerated 17 recommendations for moving forward, which fall into five general categories: internal capacity building, member engagement, growth of the CHHSM footprint, nurturing RDEI work in member ministries, and growing board capacity.

For more info go to https://www.chhsm.org/news/year-in-review-chhsm-board-examines-work-on-race-diversity-equa-


Racism is a public health crisis.

A special service to celebrate Juneteenth took place at Coral Gables Congregational UCC on that Saturday. It included church member Harold Burton sharing a meaningful story about his great, great grandfather who was born a slave in 1847 on a plantation in Tennessee along with inspiring music to renew the church’s statement of commitment to the work of anti-racism.

Emmanuel UCC/Sarasota held the first in a series of community conversations the church has planned on controversial issues, and the first was held on June 14 that featured local Black community leader Selvin Walker. Rev. George Miller said, "We’re hoping the conversations will bring the diverse members of the Highlands County community closer together." Race relations were the first topic chosen and the conversation took place right ahead of Juneteenth celebrations. As Mr. Walker said, "When individuals perceive the world like a blended stew rather than a tossed salad," that will be the time of Jubilee.

After Mr. Walker spoke, Rev. George asked Black members of the audience to share some of their stories, if comfortable doing so. Seven did speak, while the 16 White members of the audience were asked to actively listen. Four of the Whites did speak afterwards, basically commenting on the effectiveness of the format in making audience members comfortable sharing. The headline on the above-the-fold front page of the Highlands News-Sun read, "Local race relations forum draws positive comments."

Juneteenth event at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park

Emmanuel UCC/Sarasota Director of Music Ministry Bruce Ensinger chose to celebrate Juneteenth with two pieces that were set in jazz styles: “Amazing Grace” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” for the prelude and postlude at worship on June 20. Luca Stine (left) in Jazz Studies major at The Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, collaborated in the musical presentation.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota began a new tradition with a Juneteenth celebration on Saturday, June 19, on Zoom at 2pm. Participants centered themselves in prayer and had a panel discussion.

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BE THE CHURCH
Protect the environment. Care for the poor. Forgive often. Reject racism.

Time for Conversations...

Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg is encouraging its congregants to contact Federal officials regarding the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, which provides a path to safety for Afghans who worked with U.S. forces and who, as a result of that affiliation, suffer direct threats to their safety. The messages would support urgent humanitarian protections, including evacuation for those who have put their lives on the line for our country. Links are provided for this purpose.

Rev. Kim Wells and Jim Andrews were part of St. Petersburg chapter of the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance who signed a Letter to the Editor that was printed in the Tampa Bay Times. The letter addresses the rise in violence against Jews and direct threats to their safety. The messages would support urgent humanitarian protections, including evacuation for those who have put their lives on the line for our country. Links are provided for this purpose.

One of the goals at Fort Myers Congregational UCC has been to social justice become part of the church’s DNA, and they feel they have accomplished that goal.

FMCUCC has been a leader in LIFE (Lee Interfaith Ministries) with the Pastors and staff of those churches to learn about people, culture, materials and other resources that could be available to you. They will continue to have a number of things going on here. Here are a few more happenings. Please continue to participate in this conversation by contacting us at Rick.Carson@fmcucc.net.

Diapers at Casual Eats N Treats in Spring Hill every Monday in June could see 10% of their check donated to Spring Hill UCC. The outreach by the church’s Leavens & Fishes food pantry reports serving about 120 people every month.

Members of First United Church of Tampa were invited to celebrate Sunday the 4th of July by worshipping together at Lettuce Leaf Park and then enjoying a cook-out with burgers and hot dogs provided – with sides welcomed as tithes. The brief worship service was livestreamed via Facebook and on the church website.

A Sanibel Congregational UCC drive-up/drop off food drive was on June 4 with donations going to F.I.S.H and Gladious Food Pantry.

The United Church of Gainesville collected non-perishable food items on Sunday, June 6, and again on Sunday, July 4, for the Gainesville Community Ministries. Monetary donations support the agency’s purchase of bulk food items from USDA for pennies on the dollar.

The Upper Room Church, which shares the campus of The Beach Church/Pensacola Beach, invited the Beach Church to its Summer Luau on Sunday, June 6, to celebrate the end of school and the beginning of summer. There were fun activities (including a bounce house) and Christian music while enjoying grilled burgers.

Faith UCC/Dunedin recently challenged its members to bring in 100 items to church on the first day it reopened for worship and received 229 pounds instead! The collection was destined for Danedin Cares, an organizations that caters to area residents in need.

The April food drive at Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton collected 548 pounds of food for Boca Helping Hands agency.

In April the Spring Street Community Food Pantry at Good Samarian Church/Pinellas Park was open for 12 days and served a total of 1,088 clients, which translates into 374 households. In May the pantry was open for 12 days serving 1,085 clients in 333 households.

Rebecca’s Pantry at First UCC/Orlando provided food to 217 people (60 families) in May.

The Ruth Ministry at UCC/Fort Lauderdale has been especially blessed recently! It reports that their Cactus Flower Gifts neighbor across the street has donated a case of jam to the church’s Ruth Ministry Outreach. Sounds like the PB&J sand-wiches are going to be extra special. And Domino’s Pizza contributed and delivered 150 slices of pizza while the Quick Triks Bridge Club donates a portion of its entry fee to the ministry.

The newly opened county Neighborhood Senior Center occupying space in Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg now has a Meals on Wheels distribution center there. The church is encouraging members to volunteer to help deliver meals to shut-in seniors in the area.

The food pantry at Coral Gables Congregational UCC gave out 55 bags of food during the month of June.

Hope UCC/Rockledge collected 274 grocery items and food (and $20 for peanut butter!) in May for the Central Brevard Sharing Center during two days of drive-through food drop-offs, and in June 85 food items were donated plus toilet paper, approximately 20 dresses and $40 in cash for the Central Brevard Sharing Center.

Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte reports that its food pantry served 169 households (595 people) in May and 156 households (543 people) during June.

Realizing Pie in the Sky

Members of the United Church of Christ-Downtown/St. Augustine had an opportunity to visit the Pie in the Sky food warehouse in St. Augustine on Wednesday, June 23. They discussed the needs of the organization and observed how volunteers package items. They also learned about an innovative and increasingly popular food distribution system that focuses on senior citizens in Johns County where there are over 6,000 seniors who are going hungry. Food packages of fresh produce, meats and grocery items are delivered to 465 seniors twice a month.

What they also learned from this on-site tour was that more pre-made meals could be produced if the facility had additional freezer capacity. So church in conjunction with the St. Augustine Friends Worship Group (with whom they share space) decided in mid-July to begin raising money from members and friends to purchase a new GE freezer chest at a cost of about $820. Any additional dollars raised in excess of the freezer’s cost will go toward food purchases.

In the summer of 2016 we asked if it was Time for Conversations on Race, Religion, Violence, Tolerance, Justice, Inequality. We have asked you to share with our Florida churches how you see a family of faith. Have you, or are you planning how such conversations...
3 Great Loves is a denomination-wide story telling initiative, collecting and lifting up the stories of our local churches and synods about how we are living out God’s love and expressing love of neighbor, children and creation — the 3 Great Loves. From knitting clubs making hats for newborns, collecting food for food pantries, starting a recycling program at your church, standing together against social injustice — these are the stories of 3 Great Loves and no story is too insignificant to share!

On Saturday May 15, members of the Church on the Hill Congregational UCC/Boca Raton walked/run 40 times around the church parking lot island, raising over $375 for the SOS Children’s Village virtual 5K Walk/Run to assist the foster children program.

With the Fellowship Hall renovation at Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg complete, the church was able to continue Grow Permaculture training as part of the Creation Justice commitment of the church. Permaculture is a comprehensive design process that involves sustainability and earth friendly practices. The class recently met for two days of class.

The Family Promise committee at the United Church of Gainesville has been busy providing for families experiencing homelessness in the community. Beginning May 24, the church has been providing catered meals each weekday to multiple families being served by Family Promise of Gainesville. The church also offers an evidenced-based eight-week program designed to manage falls and increase activity levels in older adults.

The Beach Church/Pensacola Beach helped Navy Point 5th graders celebrate their graduation by throwing them a party.

Shepherd’s Lighthouse in Belleview and The Haven in Leesburg were the grateful recipients of the many combs, brushes and hair ornaments donated by UCC at The Villages in June. On June 5 Bea Hester met Maria Rodriguez halfway to the shelter; Maria, Children’s Advocate, said they had just run out of brushes last week. Sandy Lynch drove to Belleview June 7 and presented Theresa Chambers, case manager at the Lighthouse, with an equally large basket of brushes.

The baby shower donation by First Congregational UCC/Orange City to the Grace House Pregnancy Center in DeLand not only collected a lot of baby items but also raised just shy of $400.

Adopt-a-Street Clean-up Day on Saturday, June 12, found the volunteer team from UCC/Fort Lauderdale collecting 105 pounds of trash.

The Board of Missions at Fort Myers Congregational UCC was made aware of some undisbursed funds from recent mission offers, considered many eligible groups to share in the monies and divided the almost $2,000 between two programs in the Lee District Schools system. LAMP (Lee Adolescents Mother Program) provides a nurturing academic environment for teen parents and their children. Project ACCESS works to Assist, Clarify, Coordinate, Educate, and provide Support Services to all homeless children and youth in the system.

United Church UCC/Doc/St. Augustine members took a boat trip in June on the Matanzas River to collect trash washed up along its shores. The Litter Gitter II, a bright yellow, 24-foot Carolina skiff, is specially equipped for removing large volumes of debris. The Litter Gitter is a program of the Matanzas Riverkeeper, and it takes members of the community out on the river to remove trash from the waterways and to learn about the issues surrounding marine litter and debris. The program works to keep waterways clean and healthy while giving volunteers the opportunity to get their hands dirty and do their part. The group collected about 60 lbs of debris during the 45 minutes or so spent along a shoreline of the river. The debris included plastic bags, bottles, cups and straws plus several lengths of pressure treated wood, a perfectly intact Spiderman wave rider and even a Ken doll head and torso.

The Board of Outreach & Mission at Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami invited its members to celebrate Christmas in July as they once again collected donations for the church’s outreach to children. Contributions will make possible uniforms, book bags and school supplies for kids in Coconut Grove and beyond. A summer reading program for 3rd-8th grade children was held at Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church on weekdays between June 21-July 30 and Plymouth members were able to sign up as tutors and instructors in a variety of areas.

In honor of Gary Hart’s 90th birthday on, Friday, June 18, and in a gesture of thanksgiving and gratitude for all he has given to Faith UCC/Dunedin’s beautiful garden, the church planted a beautiful magnolia tree in his honor. He was surprised with a plaque during a recent worship service.

First Congregational UCC/Lake Worth is collecting donations for the Girls Detention Center in Lake Worth. The facility is in need of toiletries, clothes, shoes and art supplies.

Over the years, First Congregational UCC/Sarasota has supported its neighbors at Alta Vista Elementary School, which has over 500 students with 86% living in low income households. Church members used to be asked to donate school supplies, but last year due to COVID they switched to financial donations and raised $7,000 for the school, giving the school flexibility in using funds where there was a need. This year school is starting August 10, and the church’s Mission Team is seeking financial contributions once again. Over at Faith Family UCC/Brandon, members and friends are collecting school supplies for students at Minitz Elementary School.

Lenten Fund raising for Mission The Board of Outreach & Mission of Faith Family UCC/Brandon, and LAMP have been working toward additional funding for the Faith Family UCC/Brandon’s Lenten mission project to offer care packages for children and families at the New Start Center in St Petersburg. The Board is inviting the congregation to help make a difference by giving any amount to the fund. Contributions can be directed to: Faith Family UCC/Brandon, c/o Outreach & Mission, 3701 22nd Street S #213, St Petersburg, FL 33712. Thank you for your generous support of this mission project.

The FPC of Fort Myers Congregational UCC collected a 170 handmade baby afghans and other items for Project ACCESS, which assists children and their families who are homeless.

The Lake Worth UCC has been busy delivering supplies for children in need through its partnership with CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse). The church has provided backpacks full of school supplies to children for the fall.

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COVID has forced us to reassess our usual way of doing things as we adapt to — and create — the new reality.

More congregations are transitioning from virtual worship to virtual along with in-person gatherings, instituting differing rules and guidelines as circumstances dictate. Fort Myers Congregational UCC re-opened for in-person worship on Sunday, August 1. The United Church in Tallahassee (1) resumed on July 11 while continuing its online broadcasting component. There was a “soft” opening at St. Andrew UCC/Sarasota (2) on July 4 with mask rules in effect followed by a “big” opening on August 1 and returning to pre-COVID amenities. There was a great deal of rejoicing at Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park (3) when it came back together as one body, worshipping God for the blessing of once again seeing each other in person.

Here are some of the ways our congregations are moving forward and reflections from two Pastors on how their churches have experienced the changes.

The sermon on June 20 by Emeritus Pastor Rev. Sandy Reimer at the United Church of Gainesville — titled “Two Passes on the Way to Near Normal” — focused on the church’s transition from the past 15 months to what will become the next normal.

On Sunday, July 11, a post-worship seminar featured a Zoom presentation by Steven Lawson, creator of the Monk Manual, on the topic, “Integrating Being and Doing: Moving Away From Event-Based Spirituality.” Why do we tend to compartmentalize our spiritual life, viewing it as separate from our “active” life?

Rev. Mel Wilkinson reported that Christ’s Promise UCC/Auburndale re-opened Sunday, July 11, after 15 months of closure from the pandemic. She is working with a website developer to broaden the scope of outreach for her small church. She hosts a morning Prayer & Praise session every weekday at 9am, which has been live for 15 months linked to YouTube, Whatsapp and Instagram and averages 100 viewers a day.

Continuing its light-heart-ed “Weekend with Jesus” series at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach, Pastors Rev. Drs. Keith Haemelmann and Guillermo Marquez Sterling present in video e-blasts upcoming events at the church.

In a May 20 piece in the e-newsletter of Faith UCC/Dunedin titled “Refreshed, Rejuvenated, Reopening,” Rev. Mike MacMillan shared some thoughts about the congregations’ journey during the pandemic.

In a recent weekly e-blast, Cindy Kostelnik, the Moderator of Faith Family UCC/Brandon, made a special effort to thank church members who have gone to great lengths to facilitate Sunday worship during COVID. Jill, Peter, Kay and Malcolm were cited for working very hard to bring congregants thoughtful music that not only sounds wonderful but also inspires and uplifts them through the week. This includes “fixing” issues arising with the sound board and technology associated with music and coming up with “innovative solutions.” There was a special shout out to Malcolm, who has taken on this ministry and all that is required to do this remotely. Another shout out went to Joe and Scot for all their efforts in livestreaming services during the pandemic. They started out just trying to make the services available during quarantine and have now blossomed this response to serve into an entire ministry, recruiting Peter to assist when they can’t be present. Cindy shares that every week this team keeps everyone in awe of the production quality of the livestreaming, even when changes are thrown at them — and they are eager and excited to make it all work and do so with grace, energy and a positive attitude. Everyone is looking forward to post-pandemic worship and continuing to grow this ministry. Yes, it does take a church family...

The Church Council at First Congregational UCC/Sarasota has approved investing in new cameras to enhance the online worship experience at 10:55am. In addition to improving cancorders in the back of the Sanctuary, virtual viewers will be able to see a camera angle of the choir loft/organ.

In a July e-blast from Fort Myers Congregational UCC, the Tech Team at the church invested many hours learning and perfecting the process and successfully tested their work at a memorial service on July 12 that 99 people were able to view. Starting July 18 the live streaming of worship began and will continue as in-person in the Sanctuary was set to begin on August 1.

Sunday worship at the Beach Church/Pensacola Beach on July 18 was led by retired Army chaplain Rev. Dr. Matthew Owen Williams (ordained in the UCC) of the Vet Church on the topics of PTSD, moral injury and restoration. The service was also broadcast live on the Vet Church Facebook group.

In a May 20 piece in the e-newsletter of Faith UCC/Dunedin titled “Refreshed, Rejuvenated, Reopening,” Rev. Mike MacMillan shared some thoughts about the congregation’s journey during the pandemic.

After 14 1/2 months of gathering on-line, it’s almost time for us to be together again for Sunday services. June 6 will be a time of joyous celebration! Unlike many churches, Faith UCC found a way to thrive during the pandemic.

We’ve brought in more than 25 new members, many of whom we’ve not yet met in person and who have never been inside the building! Our Sunday services incorporated new technologies and continue to be both spiritual and inspirational. Anam Cara, Books & Inspiration, Hospitality,
Emerging from the Bubble... continued

Journeys, Life is Life, the Membership Ministry Team, Spiritual Study, Kundalini Yoga and the Writing Group continued unabated thanks to Zoom. Witness Wednesday has begun once again. Countless meals, pies, and flowers have been delivered to those having a rough time. The Racial Justice Core Team was formed and has already received a $1,000 grant for their work from the UCC Florida Conference. Giving has remained strong and we’ve been able to continue to financially support local organizations providing services to those less fortunate than ourselves. And most recently, the Sanctuary has been refreshed.

To me, reopening feels rejuvenating as if we’ve come through a long dark winter and once again, like our garden, we’re about to blossom in vibrant colors and activities. Not only will those who feel comfortable gather together on June 6, but we’ll acknowledge with gratitude that we not only survived, but in many ways thrived, during the COVID-19 pandemic...

Reenergized and Planning

TERE CRAWFORD, PRESIDENT FLORIDA UCC WOMEN MEMBER, FORT MYERS CONGREGATIONAL UCC

Greetings! It may be the “lazy days of summer,” but the Florida UCC Women’s officers, Board members and volunteers are busily engaged in planning a number of activities and events open to all UCC women.

First on the list are two events that will bring together women from throughout the south – from Texas to Virginia.

“God of Mystery – Spirit of Hope”

During these two events we will be exploring the meaning of Romans 12:12-13 and how the scripture can be used in our personal and spiritual lives. Our guest speaker/presenter will be Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson, UCC Associate General Minister of Wider Church Ministries & Co-Executive for Global Ministries.

October 2, 2021: Virtual UCC Southern Regional Event. This Zoom event will provide an overview of the 2022 regional retreat. Watch for registration details soon.

October 14-16, 2022: UCC Southern Regional Women’s Retreat. This will be held at Camp Weed & Cerveny Conference Center in Live Oak, Fla.

Next up for the Florida UCC Women’s group:

May 14, 2022 — In The Company of Women: “The Lord’s Earth — Caring for Creation.” This hybrid event will be an opportunity to gather in person as well as in a virtual environment. The in-person component will be held at the Florida UCC Conference Church House in Orlando; the virtual component will be hosted on Zoom by churches throughout the state. As we plan for this event we are looking for: 1) women interested in helping to plan and execute the day’s activities and 2) women whose churches are able and willing to host the virtual program. If you are interested, please see the contact information at the end of this article.

September 2023 – Florida UCC Women’s Conference. Details will be provided for this in-person gathering as plans are developed. Any suggestions for theme, programs, speakers, etc. are encouraged.


If you would like to join us in the planning any of the Florida UCC Women’s activities or you want to share what the women in your church are doing, please contact any officer or board member. Our contact information can be found at https://www.uccfl.org/contact us.

We hope everyone is having a relaxing and peaceful summer. In sisterhood, on behalf of the officers and Board members

UCC Women Around the State

The in-person and Zoom luncheon meeting of Women Engage! at Naples UCC on Thursday, June 17, was on the topic “June-June: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?” In July the discussion subject was “Christians Against Christian Nationalism.”

The Anam Cara Women’s Circle at Faith UCC/Dunedin presented a check in the amount of $500 to Random Acts of Flowers to help it continue its mission of commitment to outreach to hospitals and nursing homes during the pandemic. This not-for-profit organization has blessed the church over the past year by providing more than 150 flower arrangements for the church, community family and friends. The ACWC Flower Brigade has delivered flowers bi-weekly thereby helping the church family stay connected.

The women’s ministry at North Port Community UCC has donated $200 to the Children’s Summer Education Program in North Port. Sarah Dan, who heads the Sarasota County School lunch program, was the guest speaker at its May meeting. Pictured above is a recent meeting of the group.

Women’s Fellowship at Pilgrim UCC/Por Charlotte is on a summer break, but when it returns in September it will begin a new study using materials from Shannon Bream’s new book, The Women of the Bible Speak: The Wisdom of 16 Women and Their Lessons for Today.
Across Florida

I n “Across Florida” our intent is to share with you what is happening at our 90+ churches throughout the state. It is obvious from these entries that there is an exciting vibrancy evident within our congregations.

This energy is making a decisive difference in the lives of congregation members and the communities in which they are located while also touching the lives of strangers in far away places.

Through this sharing, you can learn about innovative ideas, creative outreach and stimulating ministry, some of which might be adaptable within your own congregation.

See something that catches your eye or brings a smile to your face? If an idea sounds good and you’d like more information about what they’re doing, contact that church.

For Father’s Day at North Port Community UCC members were encouraged to send the church office photos of their dads to be displayed during worship on June 20, with those people given an opportunity to share about their dads at that time.

At Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte, when one of its knitters picks up the needles to work on a prayer shawl whether it is for 10 minutes or an hour — a prayer is said for the person who will receive the shawl, by name if it is known. It is a prayer for comfort and easing of pain, be it physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Shawls are knit with the amount of stitches and the pattern in multiples of three. This is to honor and remind each of us of all the threes in the Bible — the Holy Trinity, crosses on Calvary, Christ rising after the third day, Christ was 33 when he was crucified, Peter denied Christ three times. When the shawl is finished, a different prayer of blessing is said for the recipient. The Prayer Shawl Ministry is stocked, and there are various sizes and many beautiful colors available.

It was Intergenerational Dog Day on Saturday, June 26, at Baker Dog Park hosted by the Children’s Ministry at Naples UCC. Puppies were provided alongside activities and a pet blessing. There also was a collection for pet items to donate to the Humane Society.

The Endowment Team at Congregational UCC/Punta Gorda has recommended the distribution of endowment funds to: the Military Heritage Museum to receive $1,500; the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens to receive $1,000; and the church’s Living the Questions Group to receive $1,000.

There have been periodic “Scripture on the Shore” Bible studies at the beach across the street from Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/Cape. Sermons were provided along with activities and a pet blessing. There also was a collection for pet items to donate to the Humane Society.

The spring congregational meeting at the United Church of Gainesville in May approved calling on the church council to develop a plan for how to use the $112,900 received under the Payroll Protection Plan; the loan from the Federal government will not be repaid.

In May the Thrift Shop at First UCC/Orlando brought in a bit over $600.

Across Florida

This week’s events:

• We preach God’s love for all God’s children.

• We celebrate our diverse church with PRIDE! A special Pride message was provided: [link]

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Across Florida

DISCUSSIONS / SEMINARS / PRESENTATIONS WE’RE HAVING...

via Zoom, or other livestreaming

“Reformation and Beyond” (Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach)

“Building Trust with the Media” (Naples UCC)

“Then & Now & Tomorrow: Repurposing in Gainesville,” “Integrating Being and Doing: Moving Away From Event-Based Spirituality,” “Critical Race Theory & the Whitewashing of American History,” “Moving Toward a ‘Settled’ Theology,” “Good Christian Sex,” “The Crisis of Springs in North Florida,” “Why Church Attendance is in Decline,” “Enhancing Your Family Genealogy” and “Emerging from Introvert Heaven” (United Church of Gainesville)

“Abraham and the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs,” “Critical Race Theory,” “What is Divine Providence?” and Genesis chapters 4-5 (UCC/Fort Lauderdale)

“Religions of the East” (Sanibel Congregational UCC)

“Sermon on the Mount” is a six-week study by Amy-Jill Levine (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

Book of Acts chapters 3-10 and “The Doctrine of Trinity” (First UCC/Orlando)

Book of Revelation, “The Situation in Haiti,” “The Protests in Cuba,” “Fighting Housing Discrimination in South Florida” and “The Story, Witness and Vision of the United Church of Christ” (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

Book of Acts (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

BOOKS WE’RE READING AND DISCUSSING TOGETHER...

via Zoom, or other livestreaming

Blessed Union: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness and Marriage by Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis (First United Church of Tampa)

“Sermon on the Mount” is a six-week study by Amy-Jill Levine (Pilgrim UCC/Port Charlotte)

Book of Acts chapters 3-10 and “The Doctrine of Trinity” (First UCC/Orlando)

Book of Revelation, “The Situation in Haiti,” “The Protests in Cuba,” “Fighting Housing Discrimination in South Florida” and “The Story, Witness and Vision of the United Church of Christ” (Coral Gables Congregational UCC)

Always a Guest by Barbara Brown Taylor (First Congregational UCC/Winter Park)

Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford (Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami)

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson and Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson (Hope UCC/Rockledge)

Life is a Verb: Live it to its Fullest is a new book by Rev. Dr. Jerry Jones, a member of Spring Hill UCC. The book is a “collection of tightly wound short stories” and is available through Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

Across Florida

LGBTQ

Members and friends of Emmanuel UCC/Sebring celebrated the second annual Sebring PRIDE on Sunday, June 27. It began at the Lake Jackson pier and moved to downtown Sebring where Pastor Rev. George Miller was the guest speaker. He addressed the assembled saying, “What a joy it is to speak here today. I am a proud gay pastor. You all need to know that you are beautiful and perfect just the way you are. I want to give tribute to my dad, a big strapping Vietnam veteran and a New York City cop. He told me whether I was gay or straight, he would love me no matter what. I can’t express how much that meant to me.” The group then took the parade around Circle Park and then gathered for a special party to celebrate the day.

The rainbow banner, a symbol of inclusion that had graced the front wall of Faith UCC/Dunedin for all to see as they walked or drove by — a symbol that has brought countless people into the church — was stolen during Pride month. That did not let it deter them and it was replaced with a newer, bolder symbol.

The church’s Journey’s LGBTQ group held a Pulse memorial on Saturday, June 12, at a nearby church where 18 members could walk its labyrinth as a bell was rung 49 times for the victims and a powerful Litany of Remembrance was read. Worship on Sunday, June 27, was a “Celebration of Pride” led by The Journey’s. [For more about the church and Pulse, see “Holy Ground” elsewhere in this issue.]

The message suggested by the sign in Pride colors at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach generated phone calls to the church office.

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Scenes from Pride Sunday at Faith Family UCC/Brandon

Celebrating Pentecost boldly in red at Spring Hill UCC (above) and Coral Gables Congregational UCC (below)

God’s Pronouns Are They/Them

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Youth Ministries

On June 6, eighteen youth at the United Church of Gainesville who had completed 8th-12th grades were able to participate in a Rebuilding Together “hometown work tour” from June 23-26. By day they worked on two homes, one in Archer and one in Alachua. By night, they gathered, ate, played, connected, and slept (a little) in the church’s Reimer Hall. Their hard work and willingness to learn new skills, the intentional time taken to make personal connections with the homeowners and all the ways that they took such good care of each other were impressive. They embodied Rebuilding Together’s three Ss (safety, stewardship and personal connections) and restored some low income housing in the area. These mission trips are a way for the students to grow in their faith, deepen their friendships and open their hearts to a cause greater than themselves.

Jupiter First Church sent high school students (and those entering high school in the fall) on a mission trip to Green Cove Springs in Jacksonvile from July 25-31. The students helped to help fund childhood cancer research.

Jupiter First Church sent high school students (and those entering high school in the fall) on a mission trip to Green Cove Springs in Jacksonville from July 25-31. The students helped restore some low income housing in the area. These mission trips are a way for the students to grow in their faith, deepen their friendships and open their hearts to a cause greater than themselves. With the cost of this mission trip at $425 per student, church members were challenged to help fund every student individually for this mission trip and for those to come.

The Wave group, composed of senior high teens, were split into two crews, one doing some beach clean-up along Lake Michigan and doing some beach clean-up and harvest work at a senior community center to help with harvesting its fruit and vegetable garden and paving a walkway.

Anchored! was the mini-VBS adventure held at Pass-a-Grille Beach Community UCC/St. Pete Beach on Saturday, June 12. It featured deep Bible adventures, coral reef crafts and anchors-away play. Other kid-oriented activities at PAG included a Rainbow River family float on Saturday, July 17.

The “All God’s Critics” camp at the United Church of Gainesville is back from August 2-6. This summer camp for children is designed for those entering Pre-K-6th grade. Crafts are planned along with STEM lessons and outdoor games. Parents’ Night Out is back (in person) at the church. On Friday night, July 9, parents could drop off kids (babies-5th grade) and let them enjoy a night of pizza and play with friends from 5:30-9:30pm. The cost was $15 for the first child and $10 for each additional child. COVID-19 protocols were in place.

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota

(October-early December)

The Words of the Ancient Prayer of Jesus

Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg

(June)

There is a Season: Air, Water, Fire & Earth

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

United Church of Gainesville

(June)

Next to Normal

Little Words, Big Ideas

Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami

(July-early October)

Journeys of Faith — Characters of the Bible

First Congregational UCC/Sarasota

(October-early December)

The Words of the Ancient Prayer of Jesus

Lakewood UCC/St. Petersburg

(June)

There is a Season: Air, Water, Fire & Earth

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

United Church of Gainesville

(June)

Next to Normal

Little Words, Big Ideas

Plymouth Congregational Church/Miami

(July-early October)

Journeys of Faith — Characters of the Bible

Good Samaritan Church/Pinellas Park

(Late June/July)

Playful Worship Series

“The One Where Jesus Takes a Nap”

“The One Where Jesus Schools Some Snobs in Table Manners”

“The One Where Jesus Doesn’t Wash His Hands”

“Come to Worship in Your Pajamas”

United Church UCC-Del/St. Augustine

(July)

To Tell the Truth
Disaster Ministry Update

Tropical Storm/Hurricane Elsa gave us a gentle reminder that hurricane season is here. There were reports of some damage and local flooding in different parts of the state, but the storm did not develop into a major event. Elsa was a good reminder for us to be prepared. It can’t be stressed enough to plan ahead and prepare while the weather is good instead of waiting until the last minute. If you are unsure of how to prepare, there are ample preparedness guides available online and in print no matter where you live in the state.

One evening during the UCC General Synod in July there was a meeting of Conference Disaster Coordinators and national staff from Wider Church Ministries. The purpose of the meeting was to celebrate and look back on 20 years of Disaster Response Ministry in the denomination. It was in 2001 after a restructuring in the national setting when the UCC began doing disaster ministry as a denomination with funding and personnel. Prior to 2001 some Conferences in the UCC had their own disaster response efforts because of localized disasters within the conference that happened on a regular basis. They also had individuals willing to organize a conference-wide network of people who would assist in disaster response and recovery. There were a few of us in the meeting that have been part of the UCC disaster ministry since its inception in 2001. It was amazing to see how much the UCC has done in so many parts of the country responding to disasters with time, talents and treasures. We get so focused on what happens where we live that we often forget about other areas and people who experience disasters. The disaster ministry also includes all U.S. territories from Guam to the U.S. Virgin Islands. There is also an international disaster component to the UCC’s Disaster Response Ministry that responds to disasters outside the United States and its territories. The UCC international response is primarily with funds to ecumenical partners in other countries.

Several million dollars have been donated to UCC disaster ministries over the years, then given in direct aid mostly in the form of grants to agencies at work in disaster response. Thousands of hours of volunteer labor have been logged from UCC church members and work groups across the country who love to do this work. Having the opportunity to look at a 20-year span of disaster response ministry brought back a lot of memories of people I have worked with over the years. This made me more keenly aware of disasters that have happened all over this country and the world where the UCC has made a difference. It is humbling and an honor to serve the denomination in this way. If you are interested in volunteering within the Conference with disaster ministry, please contact me at acoe@uccfla.org.

Minimize Church and Property Damage

Pipes burst. Downpours cause flash floods. Minimize church property damage — and disruption to your ministry — with the Insurance Board Water Sensor Program.

Learn more about our partnership with HSB Connected Technologies that offers the latest technology in early detection of water and temperature monitoring. Visit https://loom.ly/0s8uvSg to see the program in action. With the Water Sensor you can instantly know when your property is threatened with water damage, and be alerted to the problem before significant damage occurs. This can help you save thousands of dollars and avoid costly repairs.

To help churches navigate the challenges of being an employer, the Insurance Board presented a webinar focused on employment practices liability. Visit https://loom.ly/0s8uvSg to watch the webinar and download the flyer where Attorney James Abbott, Insurance Board’s Director of Claims Administration Cy McFarlin and Senior Claims Analyst Monroe Moore discussing claims trends and employment practices liability.

From e-Celebrate, July 21

At a Turning Point for Voting Rights, UCC Officers Speak Out

On Tuesday, June 22, a Republican vote blocked advancement of the For the People Act in the U.S. Senate. All 50 Republicans voted against discussion of the landmark voting rights legislation, prompting this statement from the elected officers of the United Church of Christ.

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has long witnessed to the importance of voting rights as a foundational civil rights issue and the way in which we honor the dignity and worth of every human being. Voting is often described as the heart of the democratic process, as the people we elect shape our collective life and wellbeing.

Public policy is the way we order our common life, and we hear throughout the Scriptures, from the prophets to Jesus, that when we are not in right relationship in human community, we are not in right relationship with God. In order to have an impact on the issues our faith calls us to address including climate change, hunger, systemic racism, homelessness, and endless war and so many others, we need to be able to have an electorate able to fully participate in the democratic process. Unless this happens, only a chosen few will truly be making the decisions, distorting the reality of what is facing most people in America.

A flourishing democracy is one that ensures every person has an equal opportunity to make their voice heard and be fairly represented. Voting and participation in democracy should be the easiest thing for citizens to do – but instead we see an overwhelming raft of measures to restrict voting rights in states across the country. Our democratic institutions are being distorted by dark money and deliberate disenfranchisement.

On Tuesday, the Senate had the opportunity to move forward with building a more fair, inclusive, and equitable democracy. Passage of S.1 For the People Act 2021 would lead to comprehensive election reforms that preserves the right to vote for all and each person’s vote is counted and matters. These voter protections are critically needed, especially for Black and brown communities who have been the target of specific voter disenfranchisement tactics and historically have had the opportunity to participate in democracy intentionally withheld. Unfortunately, that legislation was never even given a chance for debate or deliberation.

That the Senate was unable to move forward with even consideration of S.1 in a robust debate speaks to the brokenness of Senate rules. Using the filibuster to stop consideration is alarming, but not surprising. The history of the filibuster being used for ill intent has a long cruel record. Our lauded rules of fairness and decency have only perpetuated a nation of white supremacy. The filibuster in its current form is not a tool for democracy and is in fact standing in the way. We cannot continue down this path of inaction, there must be filibuster reform.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to stand with the vulnerable; failure to address disparities in voting rights and access will continue to push people to the margins. The United Church of Christ urges consideration and passage of S.1 the For the People Act. A strong, vibrant democracy must move forward, not backward.

Faithfully,

The United Church of Christ National Officers

The Rev. John C. Dorhauer, General Minister and President
The Rev. Traci D. Blackmon, Associate General Minister
The Rev. Karen Georgia A. Thompson, Associate General Minister

Our Sincere thanks... to unsplash www.unsplash.com and its talented artists and photographers for the many generic photos and images used in this issue.

We appreciate the generosity of this free service.

For more information, visit the UCC’s Voting Rights Action Center at ucc.org/voting-rights.
**Rev. Vonshelle Beneby**

whether to consider Associate Conference Ministers as a formal operation and thoughts. Most of us, we were able to uniquely fellowship, support and listen to one another. During committee and plenary meetings we discussed, and at times debated, how churches can focus more on what is considered “sacred”, our churches’ actions for honoring and preserving nature; whether or not our churches can become unified and proclaim peace between Palestine and Israel; whether to consider Associate Conference Ministers as a formal group, and whether to declare a ban on conversion therapy as a technique to change LGBTQ+ persons’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity. I listened intently as a committee discussed the resolution on “Gender Safety and Equity: A Commitment to Gender Safety & Equity in Ministry Settings.” I heard stories from women who experienced harassment, unfair pay and benefits and other forms of bias in their ministry settings. They explained in detail the lack of support. As a result of these experiences, they challenged and urgently encouraged the UCC to create a system to monitor and ensure equal treatment, rights and protections of those who identify as women, including cisgender and transgender persons. As a woman clergyperson I was pleased to see this approved. More importantly, I am proud to be a part of the change of cash bail bond system since “bail set for people of color and marginalized persons as a form of oppression of Palestinian people as a matter of faith, but not 122, with 34 abstentions. Read more!

**Kate Howe**

**G**eneral Synod 33 was entitled “Special Edition” and it was a virtual gathering of people from across our lands including international faith partners. I was privileged once again to participate, be inspired and be “Re-rooted in Love” along with my fellow Florida delegates. I was amazed at the seamless technology and operations that provided seven days of intensive committee work, plenary sessions and voting, workshops, worship services, virtual choirs, music, visual arts, even an Exhibit hall, all via Zoom. We all missed the person-to-person contact, of course, yet via Zoom our delegation could meet and plan, see each other and even chat during the programs and plenary sessions. It worked— in fact it was an exciting week to be a part of and I am grateful. I am sure we all took away important lessons to share with our congregations. I could hear the prophet Micah call us all through the grace-filled speakers “and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” As Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis said in our opening Worship Service that “faith, justice and love matter.” We all pray that we will have a “New roof, solid ground, deep foundations, a leader with vision, a leader with courage, a leader with integrity, and love. May it be so...grace upon grace. As the hymn by Amy Sens “Rooted in Love” we’re grounded and rooted in God, you, ground of all our ways, bear us up and hold us fast, like a tree that’s planted by the water, we’re grounded and rooted in your love. May it be so...grace upon grace.

**Blackmon Relected as Associate General Minister, Justice and Local Church Ministries**

Associate General Minister Traci Blackmon was reelected to a second four-year term by the delegates of the United Church of Christ “Special Edition” General Synod on Sunday evening, July 18. Blackmon, executive for Justice and Local Church Ministries, was affirmed by 96% of Synod’s voting delegates. Read more!

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**UCC Honors Leading Clergywomen, Activists**

As it does every two years, the United Church of Christ honored trailblazing clergywomen and leaders in justice work during its 2021 General Synod. Winners of the Antoinette Brown Society and Movement Makers awards were named during the closing plenary July 18. Read more!

**Synod Changes Decision, Passes Resolution on Occupied Hawaii**

The governing body of the United Church of Christ doesn’t usually change its mind about a vote it has taken. On July 18, it did. General Synod delegates voted to reconsider a resolution about Hawaiian sovereignty just two days before the close of the Synod. This time the resolution got 72.9% approval — comfortably more than the two-thirds required to pass. The vote was 128-122, with 34 abstentions. Read more!

**Synod Delegates Approve Resolution Denying Decrying Oppression of Palestinian People**

The United Church of Christ “Special Edition” General Synod on Sunday evening, July 18, evicted the House of Delegates from an “occupied” Israel/Palestine — an issue dear to us for our connections with the prophet Amos (for the UCC’s engagement with the issue of “Re-rooted in Love” led to a movement of love, peace and justice for all. We were asked to view other ways racism is manifested in the United States and the Hawaiian Kingdom. Also, what can we, as the UCC, do to support the Hawaiian Kingdom? We were asked to view other ways racism is manifested in several ways. This includes the lack of healthcare accessibility for people of color and marginalized persons as a form of racism. During the closing plenary, the UCC, we approved “for churches to declare and respond to racism as a public health crisis, and to monitor and advocate for public policies that work towards health equity.” Other hidden methods of racism are not accepting the United Nations declaration of an International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). We voted and approved the recognition of African descendant people as “groups whose rights must be protected and promoted” while also approving to advocate the change of cash bail bond system since “bail set for people of color and marginalized persons as a form of oppression of Palestinian people as a matter of faith, but not...” — and naming it a “sin” was too inflammatory. Read more!

**UCC Officers Speak to ‘Just Peace’ Declaration Affirmed by General Synod**

The United Church of Christ’s 33rd General Synod, held virtually this past week (July 11-18), considered and adopted a resolution regarding Israel/Palestine, but did not support the Overdose Crisis: Creating Communities and Congregations of Care” to “Bounce Forward: Churches Face Post-Pandemic Realities” and “Extravagant Welcome for All” – there’s something to grab almost anyone’s interest. Check out these quality resources and go to this link for additional information: www.generalsynod.org/on-demand-workshop-videos/https://www.generalsynod.org/on-demand-workshop-videos

**Rev. Sheila Guillaume**

(Union Congregational UCC/ West Palm Beach) was a Synod delegate and led a workshop, “Lift Every Voice: UCC Churches Lift Their Voices to Proclaim, ‘Know Justice, Know Peace’”. This workshop included the Revs. Geoffrey Black and Michael Neuroth, who addressed the many ways our UCC Just Peace congregations lift their voices towards a movement of love, peace and justice for all. To hear these voices of justice and peace, the workshop also included a video montage of Just Peace Churches from across the regional diversity of the UCC, who proclaimed what being a Just Peace Church means to them. Following the video montage, the UCC Just Peace Steering Committee shared more about the Just Peace Movement and offered a time for Q&A to invite feedback and discussion about the Just Peace process and current efforts. Here is a link to this workshop (it will be available to view until August 31): https://fronline-faith.teachable.com/courses/enrolled/1446236
of faith history, our two centuries of mission engagement, our current mission relationships with primarily Palestinian Christian partners, and our commitment to peace and justice. Read more!

**Synod Delegates ‘Deplore’ Conversion Therapy, Call for its Ban**

Delegates to the United Church of Christ General Synod condemned conversion therapy, the medical practice that attempts to “cure” the sexual or gender identity of LGBTQ individuals. With more than 98 percent of those voting in agreement, the gathering called on local congregations to “advocate for state and federal laws protecting adults, youth and children” from the practice. They also called on parents, ministers and caregivers to “protect those in their care” from persons or programs which may use conversion therapy. Read more!

**Delegates Agree It’s Time to Honor ‘Rights of Nature’**

“Who will speak for the trees?” asked Dr. Seuss in his 1971 book, *The Lorax*. “We will,” said the New Hampshire Conference, a regional body of the United Church of Christ. And now the UCC’s General Synod has spoken, too. By a vote of 518-18, with one abstention, Synod delegates adopted “‘Who Will Speak for the Trees?’ A Resolution on the Rights of Nature.” The vote came July 18, during the final plenary session of the UCC’s biennial deliberative meeting. Read more!

**Synod Votes to Recognize Alliance of Associate Conference Ministers**

The General Synod of the United Church of Christ voted July 18 to name the Alliance of Associate Conference Ministers in the UCC Bylaws. By approving a resolution brought by four UCC Conferences, the Synod recognized AACM as a “Self-Created Group” in covenant with the UCC through the UCC Board. Read more!